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CHECHEN WAR: ANOTHER RUSSIAN HUMILIATION

General Eduard Vorobyov,
first deputy commander of
Russia's ground forces,
arrived on the outskirts of
Grozny to assess the stalled
Russian invasion of



Chechnya. The scene was unsettling. Unarmed civilians had blocked his convoys; several of his vehicles had been destroyed by sniper fire; the morale of his troops was dangerously low. He quickly assessed the situation and reported to Moscow, "Whoever ordered this operation should be investigated for criminal irresponsibility."¹ Thus began the Chechen War in December 1994, sparked by an out-of-control, breakaway republic and fueled by the Kremlin's need to maintain integrity of the Russian Federation and to control strategic resources. Many questions remain regarding the Chechen War for today's strategic thinker. What decisions brought Vorobyov and his Russian ground forces to Grozny? Who made those decisions and why? What options were available? What domestic, international, economic, and historical factors played a part in those decisions? How did Chechnya play in the objectives and national interests of Russia?

BACKGROUND

Chechnya is a small, landlocked, Russian republic, a little larger than Connecticut, located on the southwestern periphery of Russia. Chechens are an independent, Muslim mountain people who have had a long history of conflict with Russia. In 1991, General Dzhokar Dudayev rose to power in Chechnya. It appears that Dudayev initially had at least the tacit support of President Boris Yeltsin's administration--in part because he had backed Yeltsin in an earlier coup attempt. Yeltsin's support rapidly disintegrated, however, when Dudayev declared the independence of Chechnya and rejected subordination to federal authorities. On November 7, 1991, after declaring a state of emergency, President Yeltsin sent a small force of Russian troops to Grozny airport to 'quell the rebellion'. But the Russian soldiers were surrounded at the Grozny airport and taken prisoner by Chechen national guardsmen. In order to avoid a bloodbath, Yeltsin was forced to back off and negotiate with President Dudayev. Russia's resort to military action hardened Dudayev's resolve. In order to free Russian troops, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev exchanged arms for the prisoners, allowing the Chechens to keep Russian weapons and ammunition that had been stored in depots in Chechnya.² The weapons included armored vehicles, artillery pieces, and thousands of Rocket-Propelled Grenade launchers (RPGs). With the RPGs, the Russians had unwittingly provided a future enemy with a very effective weapon that would be used against their own tanks. Dudayev, understanding the need to fund his growing forces, began selling many of the weapons

provided by Russia to Bosnian Muslims. Thus Russia, in its abortive attempt to suppress the Chechen quest for independence, only succeeded in strengthening the Chechens on three fronts: weapons availability, funding, and the will to fight. The Kremlin now had to reconsider their strategy to resolve the situation.

INTERESTS/OBJECTIVES

When analyzing Russia's national security strategy in dealing with Chechnya, national interests and associated objectives are a logical starting point. Russia's primary interests centered on controlling economic assets and maintaining territorial integrity. Chechnya's declaration of independence jeopardized these interests in several ways. First, Russian acceptance of Chechen autonomy could set a precedence that could lead other republics to break away from the Russian Federation. The Russian government was concerned that other regions in the North Caucasus might push for independence should Russia be unable to maintain control over Chechnya. This potential 'domino effect' could ultimately jeopardize Russia's control of raw materials in the region as well as her access to warm water ports on the eastern seaboard of the Black Sea. Another key Russian interest was related to economics. Specifically, Chechnya's capital of Grozny was a major oil-refining center for the Russian federation and many of the vital rail, road, and pipelines used to transit the oil ran through Chechnya. The Russian government did not believe it could afford to lose control of these vital transportation resources, particularly with the planned development of major new

oil fields in Azerbaijan. Therefore, the key national security objective for Russia was to keep Chechnya under control of the Russian government. The Kremlin believed they could accomplish this by removing Dudayev from power. The Russians felt that this desired 'end' was legitimate and that they had the 'means' to accomplish their objective.

ASSUMPTIONS

One of the keys to any policy formulation in support of national security strategy deals with the assumptions the strategic-thinker makes in regards to both the domestic and international environments. Boris Yeltsin made a number of mistakes in this arena as he moved his country toward military intervention in Chechnya. First, he assumed that Russia had the military capability to conduct a quick war of annihilation. This turned out to be totally incorrect. He overestimated the morale of the Russian military forces and their will to fight. Conversely, he underestimated both the military capabilities and will of the Chechens. His assumption that the Chechens would quickly fold was not based on sound intelligence or historical assessment. "Although Chechen politics were highly fractured, most Chechens rose up to oppose the Russians - not for vague political reasons, nor for Dudayev, but to defend their families and homeland from a historic oppressor."³

It is also doubtful Yeltsin had good intelligence regarding the conditions in Chechnya. Dudayev's reign had been a political and economic catastrophe--unemployment, corruption, destitution, and destruction of age-old traditions were the norms for Chechnya

under Dudayev's leadership. Based on these problems, the Chechen people were not ardent Dudayev supporters. Additionally, unrest and/or rebellions were ongoing in seven out of eleven districts in Chechnya. Given time, it is probable that Dudayev's reign would have collapsed without military intervention.

ANALYSIS

The analytical phase of Russia's strategy determination process also turned out to be defective. The biggest shortcoming was tied to the process itself. Yeltsin had recently forced through a new constitution that enhanced his power; therefore, there were fewer 'checks and balances' associated with developing policy decisions. Additionally, Yeltsin ran the Kremlin on a 'divide-and-rule' principle that allowed different factions to present conflicting policies, which fractured and polarized deliberation and decision-making.⁴ Such a process did not allow any of the numerous strategy proposals that surfaced during this timeframe to be considered carefully and dispassionately. This problem was compounded by a number of personnel changes in the Russian government during the period leading up to the military action. Many of Yeltsin's more liberal and democratic advisors were replaced with hardliners or more authoritarian figures. They carefully controlled access to Yeltsin and it became increasingly difficult for advisors who supported more conciliatory approaches to gain access to Yeltsin to express their views. Many of the hardliners wanted to use the anticipated success of the Chechen war to mitigate or even reverse Yeltsin's sagging popularity - then somewhere in the ten

percent range. With an election on the horizon in two years, the hardliners felt that Yeltsin would need a boost. Others gave advice in hopes of winning some type of political or economic windfall. Many staffers believed that those who gave advice leading to success in Chechnya would be elevated to a more powerful position in the Russian government. Ultimately, such promotion would enable them to reap the economic spoils associated with Russia's lucrative oil transport and refinery business.

INSTRUMENTS OF STATECRAFT

Yeltsin and his advisors wrestled with various options to resolve the dilemmas facing them in Chechnya. Several of the instruments, such as international organizations, international law, and alliances, were never seriously considered. Other options, using diplomatic, economic, and military instruments, were discussed at length.

Yeltsin, at one time, considered using diplomacy to try to resolve the Chechen situation. Precedent for a diplomatic solution had been set when the Kremlin earlier signed a power-sharing treaty with Tatarstan, another of Russia's rebel regions, which gave the Tartars broad economic and political rights but kept them within the Russian federation.⁵ "Vladimir Shumeiko, the Speaker of the upper house of Parliament, the Federation Council, openly said that Yeltsin should acknowledge Dudayev as the legitimate leader of Chechnya and hold talks with him."⁶ Others also supported this approach and a Russian-Chechen summit was publicly announced on 22 Mar 94. A subsequent attempt on

Dudayev's life, however, which Dudayev thought was a Russian initiative, pushed him to insult Yeltsin on Russian television and further hardened his position against Russia. This insult infuriated Yeltsin and derailed the proposed meeting between Russian and Chechen policy-makers.

Another diplomatic opportunity arose when Yeltsin's old political adversary, Ruslan Khasbulatov became a threat to the Dudayev government. Khasbulatov, at one time, held high office in the Kremlin, but due to a falling out with Yeltsin, had subsequently been thrown in jail. But under an amnesty passed in the State Duma, Khasbulatov was freed and returned home to Chechnya as a national hero. In early 1994, Khasbulatov began a peaceful bid for power in Chechnya and had significant Chechen populist support. According to the Russian Nationalities Minister, Sergei Shakhrai, "there was a chance to take power from Dudayev in Grozny in a peaceful way, when Khasbulatov called a rally of 100,000 people and we had to do just one thing—recognize Khasbulatov in Moscow."⁷

Diplomacy posed several risks. If the Russians negotiated with Dudayev, it would legitimize his claim of power in Chechnya. Conversely, if the Kremlin recognized Khasbulatov, it could cause political problems for Yeltsin. Either of these options could have fueled the resurgence of nationalism in Russia and further degraded Yeltsin's sagging popularity.

The Kremlin also considered using economic incentives in an effort to work the problems in Chechnya. These proposals were orchestrated by a liberal wing of academics and analysts such as

Emil Pain and Arkady Popov who strongly pushed for a non-military solution. Specifically their plan was to "make the north of Chechnya a 'shop window' by supplying the pro-Moscow administration in the Nadterechny Region with the money it was due from the Russian budget. Schools would be opened, pensions and salaries paid. After a suitable lapse of time—up to two years—the rest of the Chechen population would reject independence and poverty and beg to be reunited with Russia."⁸

There were also risks associated with the economic option. Propping up the Nadterechny Region would be expensive. Additionally, this option represented more of a long-term approach while Yeltsin was feeling political pressures to resolve the situation more expeditiously. Politics were the priority and this economic option fell by the wayside.

With the diplomatic and economic instruments now on the 'back-burner', the Kremlin looked toward higher-risk military options to resolve the situation in Chechnya. Yeltsin viewed a successful military operation in Chechnya as an opportunity to garner political support. It should also be noted that the decision to use military means was made despite Yeltsin's earlier public comments to the contrary. On 11 August 1994, Yeltsin stated, "Armed intervention is impermissible and must not be done. Were we to apply pressure of force against Chechnya, the whole Caucasus would rise up and there would be such turmoil and blood that no one would ever forgive us. It is absolutely impossible."⁹

Russia hoped to work its military option through an indigenous Chechen opposition group called the 'Provisional Council' led by Umar Avturkhanov. The Kremlin, however, did not believe the 'Council' was powerful enough to establish control over the entire republic on its own, so it supported Avturkhanov with money and arms to oust Dudayev from power. Several battles between Avturkhanov's Russian-backed forces and Dudayev could be categorized as stalemates and the Kremlin grew impatient. Next, Russian servicemen were recruited to help the opposition covertly. This operation also failed and became an embarrassment for the Kremlin when its involvement was exposed. Despite the failures, the Kremlin refused to review the strategy, or did so haphazardly, and a full-scale military intervention was initiated. In hindsight, many of the non-military instruments that had been discussed may have proven to be more successful than those eventually implemented.

Military actions were the riskiest of the options considered. First, military action would involve casualties. Politically, this could be damaging to Yeltsin if the loss of life was great enough to generate dissatisfaction. Additionally, there would be significant financial costs associated with the military option—particularly if fighting was protracted.

MILITARY OBJECTIVES

Having decided to use force, Russia began military exercises with Chechnya in mind. "In September 1994, the North Caucasus Military District held war games, each based on the premise that Chechen resistance would be weak."¹⁰ When Russia assisted the

'Provisional Council' in a 'coup' attempt, in November 1994, Russian forces were again captured. This time, the Chechens refused to negotiate their release. Yeltsin issued an ultimatum for all Chechens to lay down their arms within 48 hours. Dudayev ignored the ultimatum. Back in Moscow, President Yeltsin stewed over this latest Chechen 'insubordination'. "Yeltsin, angry and humiliated, wanted Dudayev and his Chechen followers crushed by the weight of the Russian army."¹¹ Yeltsin ordered Defence Minister Grachev and his staff to begin planning for military options. Priority objectives included the elimination of Chechen President Dudayev and control of the capital city of Grozny.

Grachev put Lt. Gen. Anatoly Kvashnin in charge of planning the military effort against Chechnya. Grachev was on record as saying that one Russian parachute regiment could capture Grozny in two hours. So, when Kvashnin estimated that Dudayev and his forces would fall in a matter of days, Grachev agreed. Kvashnin's and Grachev's estimates were the product of ignorance and arrogance, not objective assessment of the military situation. Many other Russian generals protested. "According to Timothy L. Thomas's *The Caucasus Conflict and Russian Security*, 'Eleven generals of the military council of the ground forces, including the commander, Col Gen. V. Semenov, appealed to the state дума that Russian forces were not prepared for such an operation.'¹² Yeltsin ignored the appeals of the opposing generals and demanded a quick victory. His long-simmering dislike for Dudayev had unduly influenced his decision to strike back quickly at the Chechen rebels. Under pressure from Yeltsin,

the military decided that the invasion would take place in two weeks.

MILITARY ASSUMPTIONS

The Russian planners made two basic assumptions that conditioned the formulation of their military objectives. First, there would be no reprisal from the international community. The Russians believed that the world would see this as an internal affair, and they were right. Second, a full-scale war would be highly unlikely. This was based on the Russian assumption that their forces were superior and could prevail in a limited war even on Dudayev's home turf. Based on these assumptions, planners would need to weigh capabilities and vulnerabilities to determine options available.

To appreciate the dilemma that Russian military planners faced in December 1994, it is helpful to look to Carl Von Clausewitz. "Clausewitz knew that the difficulty of supreme command was in large part a matter of the dilemmas of choosing the right course at the right time. Sound evaluation of particular decisions, therefore, required the consideration of a range of alternative options and the reasons for their rejection as well as the rationale for the action actually taken."¹³ Clausewitz outlined five strategic elements that a planner should consider before attempting a military operation: moral, physical, mathematical, geographical, and support/maintenance.¹⁴ It is important to review these elements and try to determine if the Russian generals considered them in their strategic planning.

CAPABILITIES AND VULNERABILITES

Clausewitz described the moral element as the skill of the commander, the experience and courage of the troops, and their patriotic spirit.¹⁵ The Russian army's moral element appeared to be in disrepair. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian military had suffered greatly from a serious lack of funding. Professional soldiers were leaving the military in large numbers. "The combat effectiveness of the Russian Army was weakened already in the autumn of 1993 with the discharge of 580,000 men who served and were trained before Russian recruitment procedures were modernized. Furthermore, due to poor housing conditions and low salaries, officers had been leaving the army in droves - 79,000 officers and warrant officers in 1992 alone."¹⁶ As a result, untrained conscripts and inexperienced officers were thrown into the Chechen operation. Russian soldiers in Grozny were observed looting. Some were described as drunk. Morale was extremely low. "One tank commander on the Chechen border probably captured the sentiment of hundreds of Russian soldiers when he noted, 'I don't want to fight. It's difficult to say who is to blame for this mess but I'd say it is probably Yeltsin.'"¹⁷ Russian generals either underrated them or were forced to abandon them. Either way, Kvashnin and Grachev were the primary people responsible for knowing the moral condition of their troops. Those troops were not morally prepared for battle - but were sent in to the bloodbaths awaiting them in Grozny anyway. This was a major vulnerability of Russian forces.

The second Clauswitzian element is physical: the size, composition, and armament of the forces.¹⁸ Strictly looking at the numbers of combatants (Russian soldiers outnumbered Chechen rebels four to one) and their weapons available to them, the Russians appeared to have the advantage. Motorized infantry, airborne forces, naval infantry battalions, and *Spetnaz* troops made up the invasion force. But the Russian planners did not foresee the level of resistance they would face from thousands of civilians. The Russian high command also put Russian forces at a distinct disadvantage in dealing with the general population by limiting their options. For instance, in the first few days of the war, Russian rules of engagement specifically prohibited them from firing their weapons unless fired upon. And even if fired upon, the Russians had to get permission from their superiors to return fire. This contributed to Russian confusion and ineffectiveness. Kvashnin and Grachev should have at least *considered*, in an unconventional war, that Chechen irregular units would play a more pivotal role during the battle for Grozny, and built Russian rules of engagement accordingly.

The third Clauswitzian strategic element, mathematical, refers to the movement of troops and lines of operation.¹⁹ This element is difficult to apply to the strategic planning in Chechnya. The movement of troops may have significant impact on tactics but is less influential in strategy. Even if Russian forces used the accepted strategy of convergent attack on Grozny, however, the fog and friction of war in an urban-warfare setting,

would probably negate any Russian strategic advantage with troop movement.

STRATEGIC CONCEPT

Clausewitz's fourth element was geographical. How to fight a war in an urban environment was probably the greatest dilemma facing the military planners. Geography would also have the most impact on their strategic strategy. The Russians would have to find Dudayev and his forces amid the streets, rubble, and sewers of Grozny. Chechen rebels could attack from most anywhere, including basements and attacks. Planners would have to consider which streets would accommodate large Russian tanks. This type of fighting would be foreign to the Russians and would call for quick, flexible, mobile forces with excellent communications at the tactical level. Yet, once again it appears that the military was ill prepared for the type of combat that lay before them. Few maps were made available on Chechnya to Russian soldiers. "Spetsnaz units landed by helicopter in the mountains to support the mechanized drive but got lost in the Chechen mountains, wandered around for three days and eventually surrendered to Chechen fighters."²⁰

The command of the initial invasion of Chechnya was split between three major Russian organizations: the Ministry of Defence, the Interior Ministry, and the Federal Counterintelligence Force. The result was command weakened by rivalry, confusion, and conflict. "Russian forces entered Chechnya in late 1994 in a confusing jumble of balky formations, reflecting to some extent the multiple military and regionalizing

trends that had taken hold in the Russian armed forces."²¹ Tanks rolled into Grozny as if their mere presence was enough to make the Chechens come to their senses and lay down their weapons. Without supporting ground troops they were quickly destroyed by small teams of Chechen fighters using anti-tank rockets. All of these incidents point to the fact that Russia did not anticipate fighting a serious battle in an urban environment. Fighting a war in a city is extremely difficult for the offensive forces. In fact, Sun Tzu, the great Chinese military thinker, said that attacking cities should be avoided at all costs. Eventually, Russia was forced to change its tactics in Grozny, but not before it had suffered defeat and humiliation at the hands of a band of Chechen rebels.

The fifth element considered by Clausewitz to be vital in military planning was statistical. This involved support and maintenance.²² The invasion of Chechnya began on New Years Eve, 1994. Grachev's plan called for four strike groups to advance on the city from different directions, advance to the center, and 'destroy all enemy positions'. Plans called for a short fight. But by mid-February, 1995, with Chechen forces still destroying Russian tanks and crews, the Russian supply system began to break down. Ammunition, food, and drinking water were in short supply. Two months into the war, the Russian government was unable to properly supply its troops. Grachev had brought the men to the war but was not prepared to sustain them. Planning for any operation should include, not only resources required for the

expected duration of the battle, but also reserve supplies to meet unexpected, long-term requirements.

ALTERNATIVES

It is difficult to determine all the alternatives Grachev considered in attacking Grozny but direct invasion of the city was probably the least favorable option considering the state of Russian training and readiness for urban warfare. Possibly Grachev should have considered a more covert strategy of invading Chechnya with special forces, trained in guerilla warfare, taking Dudayev out in the process. Another option may have been to surround the city of Grozny, cut their communications, and blockade the flow of food supplies to the city, eventually breaking the will of the Chechen people to resist. If Grachev considered this as an option, however, he did not offer it to Yeltsin, probably because Yeltsin wanted such a quick victory.

POTENTIAL RESULTS

Costs and risks appeared to be almost inconsequential to Russian military planners. The most serious risk, of course, would be a protracted war, such as the war of attrition in Afghanistan. A quick, convincing victory was expected. Minister Grachev gave little thought to the chances of a small Chechen rebel army defeating the mighty Russians in battle. Benefits, if successful, included honor for the Russian armed forces and glory for the planners themselves, and possible promotion for Grachev. Linkage to political objectives appeared weak. Assuming both objectives were achieved (Dudayev is captured/killed and Grozny is taken), what then? Dudayev was not particularly popular with

the Chechens, so it probably didn't matter to the Chechen's who was in charge. What would matter are the killing of Chechens by the Russian army and the Russian occupation of Grozny. In other words, even if the Russian armed forces completed their objective, the Chechens might continue to resist. In effect, a great military victory would be crushed under the weight of a failed political strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

It is easy, with hindsight, to look back at any war and find flaws in the strategy planning process. Chechnya had been festering, like an open wound, since the days of the Czars. Stalin had even tried to eliminate Chechens completely with mass deportations to Siberia. Boris Yeltsin, like many of his predecessors, believed that Chechnya was a rogue republic and called it a 'criminal state'. Something had to be done to bring the Chechens into line once and for all. Initially, Yeltsin did consider non-military options to control Chechnya. But, unlike Bush in the Persian Gulf War, Yeltsin did not exhaust his non-military options and that was a mistake. "In the case of Chechnya, it would obviously have been very much better for everyone if the Russian government in the autumn of 1994 had stuck with an indirect, semi-covert strategy for toppling Dudayev, and had avoided the direct clash of arms in decisive battle."²³ But, in the end, emotions, probably influenced by racism, prevailed. Chechnya was demonized and had to be taught a lesson. The Russians opted for a direct clash of arms and suffered for it. Military planning was a rushed job with little

or no thought to planning and little regard for Chechen opposition. Once in Grozny, things got out of control and the once mighty Russian army, was brought to its knees by a small band of rebels. Chechnya had become the latest Russian humiliation.

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- ¹ Lt. Col (P) John F. Antal, "A Glimpse of Wars to Come, Army (June 1999): p. 32
- ² Antal, p.30, 31
- ³ Antal, p.33
- ⁴ Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, "A Small Victorious War", Chapter 8 in *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York:NYU Press, 1998), pp. 144,145
- ⁵ Gall and Waal, p.143
- ⁶ Gall and Waal, p.145
- ⁷ Gall and Waal, pp.150,151
- ⁸ Gall and Waal, p.145
- ⁹ Gall and Waal, p.149
- ¹⁰ Antal, p.31
- ¹¹ Antal, p.31
- ¹² Antal, p.31
- ¹³ Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "The Relationship of History and Theory in On War: the Clausewitzian Ideal and Its Implications", p.8
- ¹⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ.:Princeton University Press, 1976),p.183
- ¹⁵ Clausewitz, p.186
- ¹⁶ Pontius Siren, "The Battle for Grozny: The Military Failure", in *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crises*, edited by Ben Fowkes (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), p.122
- ¹⁷ Siren, p.126
- ¹⁸ Clausewitz, p.183
- ¹⁹ Clausewitz, p.214
- ²⁰ Antal, p.34
- ²¹ John Arquilla and Theodore Karasik, "Chechnya: A Glimpse of Future Conflict?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 22 (1999): p.211
- ²² Clausewitz, p.183
- ²³ Anatol Lieven, "The Russian Decision to Intervene and the Geopolitics of Oil," "The Anarchy of Russian Decision-Making," and "Russian Strategy in Chechnya," from *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p 126